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ABSTRACT

Although students who feel good about themselves and their abilities are the ones who are most likely to succeed, there is little in reading materials today that would make a student feel good about himself. The emphasis given to reading skills, sequence, and objectives has forced self-concept into the background. Thus, this paper explores the relationships that exist between reading and self-concept and describes practical applications of this relationship so that an elementary teacher can use them in the classroom to improve self-concepts as well as reading abilities. To build better reading self-concepts, it is suggested that teachers minimize the difference between reading groups. Of equal importance are the students' feelings of acceptability to their teacher, which can be accomplished through a sharing of interests and a classroom atmosphere conducive to favorable self-images. These positive self-concepts can then be extended into the home through group meetings with parents or school-home cooperative programs. Above all, teachers should recognize that success or acceptance are products not of a set of materials or of a program or classroom organization, but of the teacher. (HS)

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self-concept and reading

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INTRODUCTION

After studying the existing research dealing with self-concept and school achievement, William W. Purkey made the comment:

> For generations, wise teachers have sensed the significant and positive relationship between a student's concept of himself and his performance in school. They believed that the students who feel good about themselves and their abilities are the ones who are most likely to succeed (1970, p.14).

While there is no indication of how many of these wise teachers exist, there is little question of the truth in Purkey's statement.

Yet, as the wise teacher surveys the programs and materials in reading that are available today, he is able to find little that helps him make students feel good about themselves and their abilities. With a few notable exceptions, the emphasis that teaching materials have given to reading skills, sequence, and objectives has forced self-concept into the background. As a result, the teacher who senses a relationship between a student's concept of himself and his reading performance finds it difficult or impossible to locate information on the nature of that relationship or methods of improving the concepts students have of themselves as readers.

The material that follows was written in an attempt to fill that void. The information provided is intended to help those teachers of reading who wish to combat reading difficulties through the building of self-concepts.

OF READING AND SELF-CONCEPT

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the relationships that exist between reading and self-concept are explored through the examination of research-based current thinking regarding these relationships. Secondly, practical applications of these relationships are described so that an elementary teacher can use them in the classroom to improve self-concepts as well as reading abilities.

Definitions

Before exploring approaches to the improvement of self-concept, some agreement must be reached regarding its nature. Although a variety of definitions is given, in this paper the term *self-concept* refers to all the perceptions that an individual has of himself; especially emphasized are the individual's perceptions of his value and his ability.

There are two aspects of self-concept about which most psychologists appear to agree:

1. The perceptions of self that an individual has include his view of himself as compared to others (self-perception), his view of how others see him (self-other perception), and his view of how he wishes he could be (self-ideal).
2. The perceptions of self that an individual has are largely based upon the experiences that he has had with those people who are important to him (significant others). Thus, such people can effect change in the individual's self-concept.

Good self-concept

A good or positive self-concept is one in which the person perceives himself as capable and/or important and is, therefore, able to perform at a normal or superior level. In terms of reading,

this is a set of self-perceptions that in no way interferes with reading ability or with ability to learn to read. It may, in fact, enhance the person's opportunities to learn to read well.

Poor self-concept

A poor or negative self-concept, on the other hand, is one in which the person perceives himself as incapable or unimportant to such an extent that he is unable to perform at a normal level. Related specifically to reading, this is a set of perceptions that interferes with reading ability or with the ability to learn to read.

Reading self-concept

In addition to a global self-concept—the total of all perceptions that an individual has of himself—a child appears to have subcategories of self-concept (Brookover, Sailor, and Paterson, 1964). As a student he has a concept of himself which in turn is composed of several self-concept subroles. Those perceptions which are related specifically to reading can be termed *reading self-concept.*

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN READING AND SELF-CONCEPT

Correlates of self-concept

If the direct and specific causes of self-concept—good or poor—could be identified, the task of improving self-concepts would certainly be simplified. To date, however, no research has been successful in isolating such causes. This fact should be no great surprise since causes of behaviors, and certainly of perceptions, are difficult, if not impossible, to identify. However, studies of correlation, comparison, and predictability have provided enough consistent, positive evidence that tentative assumptions can be developed.

Studies that have correlated levels of reading achievement with levels of self-concept indicate that a positive association exists between the two. Studies of comparison have found significant differences in self-concept scores between high achieving and low achieving readers with the former receiving higher self-concept scores. Some validity has also been found for using global self-concept prior to reading instruction as a predictor of reading success in later grades.

The correlates of self-concept that have been fairly well established follow.

Past experiences

The self-concept of an individual is developed as a result of the experiences he has had (Combs and Snygg, 1959; Purkey, 1970). Maehr (1969) suggests that a child's reactions to experiences are based more on views that people important to the child appear to hold of him than upon the child's success or failure with a task itself. The views that these people appear to hold are revealed through their reactions to the child's behaviors, through their approval or disapproval, acceptance or nonacceptance, love or lack

of love, and through other rewards and punishments. From a very early age, the child learns two concepts from such reactions: how competent he is in activities which are deemed important by people significant to him and how valuable he is as an individual. Thus, if the people important to a child (especially his parents in preschool years) regard a skill or behavior as important but teach him, through reactions, that he is incompetent in that skill or behavior, a negative self-concept is formed. The child can learn to expect competence or incompetency in a skill—even before his first trial with it—if he is so instructed.

Self-concepts can also be learned purely by self-evaluation as a result of trial and error (Richardson, 1968). However, these concepts are normally limited to those of specific competencies and will not necessarily lead to concepts of overall self-value. Of the two forces which dictate self-concept, then, the influence from other people seems to be greater. When the child's self-evaluation of his competency and the reactions of people whose opinions he values reinforce each other, a self-concept is firmly established.

It is possible, then, that low self-concepts which lead to reading disabilities are caused either by the child's evaluation of his failure to learn reading during his initial attempts or by the reactions of parents, peers, and teachers prior to or during his attempts to learn reading. Most likely both factors play a role in this grim situation.

Counteractions

When an individual feels that those people who are significant regard him as incompetent, he attempts to counteract this appraisal (Anderson, 1952). In his quest for feelings of overall importance, the child has only four alternatives regarding any competency even though he may not be conscious of them. He may actually feel competent in those activities which are important, he may hide or disguise his lack of ability, he may deny the importance of the activities, or he may make it clear that he has extended no effort. As in the oriental custom of "face saving," to publicly admit that one has made every effort with important activities and then failed is out of the question.

With the current emphasis that society places upon reading ability, most children today grow up in an environment in which

inability to read is socially unacceptable. So denying the importance of reading ability is difficult.* For most children who are blocked from feeling competent in reading, then, only two alternatives are often available: disguising incompetency or withdrawing effort. Few children are clever enough to hide or disguise from both teachers and peers something as obvious as reading disability. Many children are forced into a position, therefore, where they must give the appearance that effort has not been extended. Thus, to avoid having his reading self-concept lowered even more, the child may exhibit behaviors similar to the following: Showing apparent disinterest in reading, showing apparent lack of effort to learn to read, refusing to read assigned material, and/or showing apparent carelessness or professed hatred of reading. These behaviors are not always caused by poor self-concepts but are a common outgrowth of such self-attitudes.

Self-concept reinforcement

Paradoxically, while they are attempting to reduce the threat (i.e., lack of social acceptance due to reading disability) brought on by poor self-concept, many children are unconsciously reinforcing their own poor self-concepts (Anderson, 1952; Moustakas, 1956). An individual decides how competent and how important he is as a consequence of his past experiences. As long as this conception remains unchanged, he unconsciously behaves in a manner that will evoke the type of treatment or response to which he has adjusted himself. He is comfortable, moreover, with such anticipated responses because they tend to reinforce and give consistency to his self-concept.

Children, then, who come to school believing that they will not succeed in reading, as well as children who gain this concept at a later time, may become victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Believing that they will not succeed in reading, their behaviors and efforts during reading instruction contribute to making their expectations come true.

The spiraling process

Not only does poor self-concept interfere with learning to read

* When a child enters an environment in which peers no longer regard reading as an important activity, his self-concept is likely to improve although his reading ability is not.

but the resulting reading disability leads to an even poorer self-concept. An entire spiral of cycles with reading disability and self-concept continually reinforcing each other is described by Bond and Tinker (1957) and by Holmze (1962).

Contrarily, if the child is successful in extracting ideas from the printed page and if the people important to him enable him to recognize his success, he will develop a concept of himself as a "reader." As a result, he will attempt more difficult material, he will take more pleasure in reading, and he is apt to read more widely. The wide reading makes the child a better reader. As he recognizes his improvement and as the people important to him notice it, his concept of himself as a reader is enhanced; and the cycle continues.

The role of self-concept in learning to read or in improving reading skill, then, is very important and may continue to grow in importance if nothing is done to reverse its effects.

BUILDING POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPTS

Diagnosing self-concepts

In order to meet individual needs it is important to know which children can profit the most from instruction geared toward improving self-concepts. Such a classification is possible only when you, the teacher, are able to recognize which of the children assessed as poor readers also have poor self-concepts. Careful diagnosis, therefore, is necessary.

Diagnosis of self-concept, however, like many types of evaluation, offers some difficulties. Self-concept is a construct, not a behavior. It produces a great number of behaviors, but no pattern of behaviors that is consistent across all individuals has been found. Tests can only assess behaviors, physical or verbal; mental processes can be assessed only through the behaviors they produce. Precise validity, therefore, is nearly impossible to establish for any measure of self-concept.

Yet, to completely eliminate all self-concept diagnosis is foolish in light of the importance it appears to have for children's learning to read. There are several categories of behaviors, as indicated by the correlates of self-concept, which provide strong clues for diagnosis. And there are two types of measures to diagnose self-concept: paper and pencil tests and informal observations.

Tests

A number of paper and pencil self-concept tests have been developed especially for experimental purposes. Most of these tests have never been published, but information and/or copies are available from their authors. A list of those appropriate for elementary school is included in the appendix along with a short list of published self-concept tests.

In addition to the problem of validity, most of the paper and pencil tests are limited by the fact that they are "self-report" measures. In other words, the child is asked to determine or

evaluate his own perceptions of himself in response to a statement or question on his test paper. For example, he may be asked to select one of several adjectives that best describes his feeling or indicate which items in a list of descriptors apply to him. The difficulty with such procedures is that one cannot determine with what insight and with what honesty a child can or will attack such a task. The few commercial tests which are designed to measure self-concept through means other than self-report must be individually administered, usually by experts who have been trained in test administration.

Informal observations

Observations of individuals on a nonstandardized basis, although overcoming the objections to self-report measures, pose a different type of objectivity problem. If before he observes the child a teacher believes that child to have a poor self-concept, then evidence to support that conviction is apt to be found, regardless of the child's actual perceptions. Thorough observations, however, which record all pertinent behaviors over a period of several days or weeks and which incorporate the independent conclusions of an outside observer should result in an objective evaluation. The observations can be recorded on a simple checklist which allows space for written comments. Five types of behavior which give an indication of self-concept are ordinarily observable in a school setting.

Comments. Observe the comments that the child makes either about himself or about reading. Negative comments about himself as a person reveal poor global self-concepts. Negative comments about his ability to read or about reading reveal poor reading self-concepts. Of course, the comments need to be repetitive, consistent, and sincere before they are valid indicators.

Reactions. Observe other reactions to reading instruction and reading tasks. While children use a variety of behaviors to demonstrate their feelings, through daily interaction a teacher learns to associate the behaviors of each individual with appropriate feelings. Facial expressions, body movements, gestures, groans, and similar noises can all indicate lack of interest in reading. Lack of interest can be due to the low motivation that accompanies poor teaching, but it can also indicate low self-concept. The degree to which the other children in the class-

room dislike reading should give some clues about which cause to suspect.

Interactions. Observe the child's interaction with his peers. The actions both of the child toward others and of the other children toward him give some indication of his self-concept. If he either attempts to avoid playing or working with others or engages in attention-getting devices, some evidence is present that he suffers from a poor self-concept. If his peers consistently ridicule him or shun him, it is likely that he has developed such perceptions.

The same types of interactions can be observed during reading instructional periods. If a child substitutes attention-getting devices for participation in the instruction or if his peers ridicule his reading ability, his reading self-concept is likely to be poor.

Volunteer answers. Observe the extent to which the child volunteers to answer questions raised during class discussions. When he seldom if ever volunteers, a number of factors could be the cause. If he seldom volunteers in any academic area but demonstrates general knowledge and interest when called upon anyway, poor global self-concept is a likely cause. If this set of behaviors is limited to reading instructional periods, poor reading self-concept is a likely cause.

Volunteer answers of another type must also be observed. Some children volunteer often during class discussions but seldom have pertinent answers or comments. A child in this category could be attempting to disguise his lack of competency as discussed earlier. This set of behaviors, therefore, could also be a clue to poor self-concept.

Confidence. Observe the confidence with which the child makes decisions. Perhaps the best indication of this confidence is a measure of the extent to which he asks questions about the tasks that you assign him. An extreme in either direction can be informative. If he constantly asks questions about the progress of his work, this action can be a sign of the insecurity that accompanies poor self-concept. On the other hand, if he never asks questions, this behavior can also indicate insecurity.

Diagnosis summary. No single criterion is likely to be adequate in diagnosing self-concept. Many of the behaviors described could be attributed to other causes. If a number of the negative behaviors, however, are consistently present in a child,

one should be able to conclude with some confidence that the child's reading problems are related to poor self-concepts.

Developing a positive classroom atmosphere

Together with the home and social groups, the school classroom contributes largely to the shaping of a child's self-concept (Staines, 1958). A classroom atmosphere can be conducive to developing favorable self-images in students (Purkey, 1970). And it must be remembered that a classroom atmosphere involves the comments and actions of the children as well as those of the teacher. Since it is not likely that a classroom of children will be naturally warm and accepting toward all individuals, you will need to lead your pupils toward an atmosphere that is conducive to developing positive self-concepts.

Building global self-concepts

Acceptance. Guide children so that they will accept the weaknesses and mistakes of others. This challenging goal may be pursued in at least two ways.

First, you must be accepting of weaknesses and mistakes yourself, even with those children who do not always behave in a manner that you naturally find acceptable. Your degree of acceptance will be clearly visible in the comments that you make to individuals about their work and behaviors, in your reaction to accidents, in the approaches that you use with discipline problems, and in the amount of patience you demonstrate. If your comments about pupil products are mainly positive, if your correction of behavior is aimed at the specific act rather than the total child, if you remain calm after classroom accidents, if you expect children to be learners rather than experts, acceptance will be a natural element in your classroom.

Second, you need to offer positive reinforcement to children who make positive comments about others. There is no more appropriate place for praise than with the child who expresses acceptance of others' errors or low abilities.

Negative comments. Guide children so that they reduce negative comments or actions toward others. Any typical classroom is filled with many negative comments directed toward individuals and a large percentage of these comments originate with the teacher. If you are accepting, your own negative com-

ments will decline as will those of the children who take their behavior cues from you. When children do ridicule, criticize, or act negatively toward others, a group discussion about the universally human quality of imperfection can sometimes be helpful. One approach is to begin such a discussion by relating an episode indicating a weakness in the life of a famous person, then leading into a discussion of the fact that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and finally focusing on the specific behavior to be eliminated. (It may be very beneficial to include your own weaknesses and errors in the discussion).

In addition, be very careful that you do not unconsciously reward negative comments. Many children receive the additional attention they desire when their teachers make frequent public note of negative interactions. Attempt to redirect the child's method of seeking attention; rather than reward him try taking the time to correct him in front of his peers. When it is necessary to help the child overcome his negative actions, talk with him or correct him in private.

Tattling. Help children develop a discriminating attitude toward tattling. To encourage the reporting of others' behaviors may lead to an unmanageable situation as well as violate the suggestions just made concerning negative comments. On the other hand, banning all tattling closes doors to children who at times may need your help. The development, instead, of pupil ability to discriminate the significant from the trivial can lead to a happy balance between the two extremes. A great deal of your patience will be required to develop such traits, for you will need to listen to each pupil report before you can help the informer decide if his information is important. By giving positive reactions to the types of reports you wish to condone and negative, but understanding, reactions to those you wish to eliminate, you should be able to develop discriminating abilities. For example, when a significant incident is reported, an appropriate comment might be, "Thank you for telling me; I'm happy that you know when to tell me about other children." When a trivial incident is reported, an appropriate comment might be, "Do you think this is something you should have told me or could you have handled this better yourself?" Of course, you will need to be consistent in the types of reports you accept and reject.

Embarrassment. Avoid embarrassment as a punishment.

Almost certainly there will be child behaviors within your classroom that you will want to control or eliminate. But of all the classroom control devices from which you can choose, the poorest alternative is probably embarrassment. It may be effective, but it can crush the individual's self-concept. If your classroom has a positive atmosphere, correction in private can be just as effective and much less damaging.

Building reading self-concept

Reading groups. Minimize the difference between reading groups. Enough evidence has been gathered to establish the fact that reading ability differences cannot be completely disguised from children. When groups are formed on the basis of reading ability, children are aware of the status of their group. This point does not necessarily indicate, however, that grouping according to reading ability for part of the instruction is bad. The damage to self-concept that frequently accompanies ability grouping is not produced so much by the child's knowledge of his group's status as it is by the manner in which the teacher treats the groups. A child should be made to see that high levels of reading skill are not essential to his acceptability as a worthwhile human being; he should be able to "save face" for any reading inadequacies he may have. He should be able to avoid branding himself as a permanent member of a low-ability group. Progress toward this goal can be achieved in two ways.

First, avoid comparisons and competition among groups. Do not threaten a child that you will move him "down" to another group or promise him that you will move him "up." Do not discuss how far "ahead" one group is of another. Reject comments from children that any group is fast, slow, good, bad, ahead, or behind. Give the impression that you accept all groups equally.

Secondly, vary the bases on which groups are formed. If a child is not always in the same group, he will be less tempted to brand himself as a member of the group. Groups can be based on an interest area or on a specific need as well as on general reading levels.

Interest area groups are formed when several children have independently read books on the same topic or when they desire to work together on a common interest task involving reading. The purpose of the group is to give children an opportunity to

share their readings, so little actual instruction is frequently needed. The group exists only long enough to meet this purpose, usually for one or two sessions.

Specific-needs groups are formed when several children, regardless of their ability-group-membership, demonstrate a similar reading weakness or need. Since the purpose of the group is to develop a specific skill, the group exists only until that skill is mastered.

The groups should provide every poor reader some opportunity to associate with recognized good readers. It may be advisable at times, therefore, even to form groups arbitrarily. If you feel the need to have basic groups formed around general reading levels, do not overlook the value in frequent use of these other groupings so that ability differences may be deemphasized.

Comparing progress. Compare the reading progress of an individual with his own previous work rather than with that of other pupils. Certainly you already avoid statements such as, "Mark, your work is the poorest in the class." You convey the same message to him, however, when you consistently exclude him from positive comparisons made with other children. Avoidance of all comparisons would be more appropriate. Comments making comparisons can be harmful to the pupil with a high self-concept if they train him to find success only in terms of comparisons with others; but the practice is especially harmful to the child who, when compared, is always found wanting.

Comparisons are not always limited to comments. Many teachers like to keep public records of the books read independently by the children. These records may take the form of rockets aimed for a moon, cars on a race track, apples on a tree, or any other of a host of similar devices. This practice compares children's abilities as surely as verbal comments. Any practice that relies on comparisons for its success is bound to be destructive of self-concept for the child who consistently compares unfavorably.

In contrast, when an individual compares his own progress over a period of time, the results can be healthy. This type comparison can be achieved when children keep private records of books read, skills mastered, or words learned. Keeping records of workbook or worksheet scores will not seem to demonstrate the same progress to children because the material continually deals

with new content. Even though progress is made, scores appear as if they remain constant. Another fruitful self-comparison is accomplished when children read the same passage orally into a tape recorder at several points during the school year and listen to the improvements. An examination of a child's reading ability at several points during the school year is likely to reveal some progress, thereby improving his self-concept.

If you are in a school situation where you are allowed to make report card comparisons a matter of individual progress, such a practice will also aid in the development of a positive classroom atmosphere. It is possible to avoid certain end-of-term setbacks if traditional report cards, based on comparisons with the class, can be eliminated.

The more important the opinions of peers are to a child, the more important a positive classroom atmosphere is to healthy self-concept development. Specific ideas for structuring a classroom in a positive way can be gained from a recent text by Hamblin et al (1971).

Making the child feel that you accept him

While it is very important that the child perceive an air of acceptance in his classroom in general, of equal importance is his feeling of acceptability to his teacher. A number of studies have shown that a definite relationship exists between teacher attitude toward a child, especially as perceived by the pupil, and pupil self-concept (Davidson and Lang, 1960; Purkey, 1970). Although the teacher's influence wanes as the child grows older, it does not cease by the end of the elementary school years. The teacher is one of the important persons (significant others) whose opinions the child values, so it is important that the pupil feel accepted by the teacher. One of the best ways to accomplish this goal is to share his interests.

Using child interests

A few children apparently have such a bland background that they never developed any strong interests. However, these children appear to be the exception rather than the rule; and teachers usually are able to provide even these students with enough experiences to develop interests which can be utilized in classroom planning.

Capitalizing on any child's interests can do much for making him feel that you accept him. The child selects his own interests; they become a part of him. When he sees that you accept his interests, it will add to his feeling that you accept him.

Determining interests. Obviously, the first step in using a child's interests is to determine what they are. One common method for discovering interests is the recording of books read over a period of time and the search of these records for interest patterns. Since, however, the type of child whose self-concept has had a debilitating effect upon his reading is being discussed, it is unlikely that he will have engaged in much independent reading. Other techniques will need to be developed, therefore, to determine interests.

Individual pupil-teacher conferences can supply a great deal of information. Such conferences are often associated with the individualized approach to reading, but there is no reason to limit them so narrowly. During any conferences, the child and you can openly discuss what he likes to do as well as what he would like to read or have read to him.

In addition, observations of the child's free time activities and interests expressed during spontaneous pupil-teacher conversations will add to your knowledge. The assumption is made that he will engage in and discuss those activities that interest him the most. Much of your observation could be done at the same time as the diagnostic observations which were described earlier. A notebook with a page for notes on each child is one excellent way to accumulate your observations.

Using interests. After interests have been determined, you can proceed with capitalizing upon them. One application of the child's interests deals with selecting materials to read to the class. Children of all ages enjoy having stories or other material read to them. At times you may select material to read that you enjoy or that you wish the children to hear for its literary value. At other times, though, you can choose materials to read that deal with a specific child's interests. Of top priority in your selection of materials should be the interests of the child suffering from a poor self-concept. If he can see that his interest area is important to you, he is more likely to feel that he is important. Such activity may even spur him to attempt reading about his interest, an action which offers much potential success due to high motivation.

Placing on display books and materials that deal with the child's interests is another method of making his interests appear important. Displaying books attractively in the room library area is a good year-long practice for motivating children to read independently. When the displays are changed frequently and when the child sees books in his area of interest on display, this practice has the added benefit of improving his self-concept.

Very often children become so interested in a topic that they develop into junior experts. When this phenomenon occurs with a low self-concept child, you are offered a good opportunity to make him feel accepted. Plan your lessons carefully so that the topic of interest becomes pertinent to some area of your curriculum. Arrange to have the child share his knowledge with the class. While there is value in calling on him for information on a number of spontaneous occasions, planning with him how he might present and illustrate his topic is more likely to make him feel successful. You can improve the acceptance given him by the class if you introduce the child's expertise to the class prior to his presentation. The wonderful effect that the sudden role as an authority can have upon the child's self-concept makes rearranging your teaching schedule to include his topic worthwhile. If the topic cannot be placed in a natural part of your curriculum, give him separate time for his presentation.

The creation of reading groups based on common interests can also add to the importance placed on his interests. In such groups the children can read to one another from materials dealing with their topic, they can share what they have already read, or they can plan how to present their topic to the class.

In short, use every method possible to make the child's interests seem important.

Using the child's writings

Just as interests can be used to make the child feel accepted, products of his creativity can serve the same purpose. When the child is given the opportunity to be truly creative about his writings and he knows he has put effort into them, he is likely to identify with them whether he does his own writing or he dictates his ideas to the teacher who writes them on a language experience chart. As with interests, if you accept and regard with importance his creative writings, his chances of accepting himself and feeling important will be enhanced. Three steps are involved

in displaying your acceptance of children's writing products.

1. Allow individuals to present to the class what they have written or you have written for them. The child should not be forced to read his writing product; to do so would destroy all of the motivational advantages offered by the use of his language. At least one volunteer is needed to read his written product; and then other volunteers should mushroom thereafter if the remaining two steps are followed.
2. Display enthusiasm for the writings that are read by making it very clear that you are listening to and appreciating what is being read. Following each individual's reading there must be positive reinforcement from you. Certainly, there will be some positive comments that you can make about any writing. Unless a product is actually outstanding, limit the praise to the specific areas that are best or where progress has been made. If time after time you tell every child that his paper is "good," such praise becomes routine and appears insincere. Recognition of specific qualities provides models for all children to follow in seeking your approval yet keeps the praise meaningful throughout the year. The first few times this procedure is carried out, it is especially vital that you meet the writings with favorable reactions and much enthusiasm.
3. If, however, your favorable reactions are counteracted with negative comments from the reader's peers, little progress will be achieved. It is important that the children learn to react in a positive manner, also. In order to achieve this state, it may be necessary to enforce a "positive comments only" rule during discussion of individual writing products. If you reinforce the positive comments that children make with positive comments of your own, however, enforcement can quickly be replaced with natural reactions. Children can be spurred to find good qualities about a writing product as readily as they can to find faults.

Many teachers feel that they need to point out errors and weaknesses in the products of children. This "constructive criticism" is supposed to keep children from developing an attitude that any quality of work is acceptable and from a belief that no

effort is needed. Children who have strong self-concepts and confidence in their languages can, perhaps, profit from such criticism, but children who have poor self-concepts suffer from it. Praise of the specific qualities that you wish to develop, when they appear in student products, is much more effective. If the qualities you wish to develop never appear in student products and you feel you must help a child recognize a problem area, use a "This is how you can make it even better" approach.

When children see that you are looking for good qualities in their products rather than poor, they are apt to put more effort into their writings. This reaction will, in turn, increase identification with the products. The child with the low self-concept will, consequently, be helped when these products are accepted.

An alternative to written products of the child is the tape recorded product. Acceptance of recorded ideas can be demonstrated in much the same ways as those described for written products.

Using the child's volunteer reading

Content area education has largely moved away from an oral reading "round robin" type of textbook instruction. Process education and discovery learning frequently make no use of a single text. Yet, many classroom teachers use volunteer oral reading in various parts of the curriculum. Reading self-concepts can be raised through the proper handling of such occasions in much the same way that global concepts can be aided by creative products.

When teachers require oral reading, call on volunteer readers but then avoid the faltering reader who seems to waste so much time. Much damage can result. In addition to the questionable value of this practice for content learning, repeated avoidance of the child can reinforce his negative self-concept.

In contrast, you can improve a child's self-concept if you offer him the opportunity to read before his peers and then accept the results. Of course, if the result is an obvious failure, your acceptance will appear to be a fake. To avoid this dilemma, carefully match both the difficulty and the length of the passage to be read with the ability of the reader. If the reading instructional materials match the children's abilities, this task will be relatively easy during reading lessons. For content area oral reading, however, careful planning will be necessary. If a single text is being

used for all children, material to be read must be scrutinized in advance so that short passages with no difficult vocabulary can be reserved for children with low self-concepts. If a number of resources are being used in a given content area, children should be guided into pertinent material at an appropriate reading level so that any volunteer oral reading will be successful. Children reading at a level below the majority of their peers should have oral opportunities as frequently as the more skilled readers. Of most importance, however, is your acceptance which must await the child upon completion of his oral reading.

Of course, the question may arise, "How can I get the low self-concept child to volunteer?" While no guaranteed procedure can be recommended, you will find an increased number of volunteers as the children learn that they can receive recognition and acceptance with their oral reading.

Providing the child with feelings of success

While some children apparently thrive on challenge, other children function best when they are quite certain they will succeed (Maehr, 1969). Children who have experienced few successes and have a related low self-concept are the ones who profit most from guaranteed success, i.e., activities that are geared at a level simple enough to virtually guarantee their satisfactory completion. After reviewing the related research, Purkey concluded: "Perhaps the single most important step that teachers can take in the classroom is to provide an educational atmosphere of success rather than failure" (1970, p.55).

Most classroom situations provide nearly an infinite number of opportunities for child success. The following suggestions are designed to assist you in recognizing and using such opportunities.

Establishing priorities

Prescriptive or diagnostic teaching may suggest that the teacher's role in dealing with a disabled reader is to provide him with the skills he is missing. Many teachers have failed in their efforts to improve reading ability in this manner, however, and much of the failure may be associated with the neglect of the affective domain. When the child's self-concept has a debilitating effect upon reading, work on reading skills alone will be fruitless. When

his self-concept is so negative that he expresses no desire for ever learning to read, it makes more sense to build the self-concept before attempting to correct the reading. The main emphasis should be upon success. Of course, it may be possible to work on both aspects simultaneously, but success should never be forfeited for skills needs in the beginning of the program.

If, in fact, the child has already received instruction in the weak skills areas in lower grades without success, there is considerable doubt that reteaching the same content with the same basic approach will produce success. Another encounter with failure can only serve to confirm the poor self-concept that the child already has.

It may be wise, therefore, to begin the program for improving self-concept with content in which the child already has some skill or ability rather than content in which he has none. This recommendation does not mean routine and dull drill of skills already learned; it suggests meaningful instruction within the child's strong areas. For example, if a child already has grasped the relationship between consonant letters and sounds but has few of the skills that are considered more advanced, consonants could be studied first. Instead of subjecting him to needless consonant lessons and worksheets, however, you could have him construct charts, posters, or transparencies that illustrate consonant pronunciations. Or you could plan with him how he might instruct other children in this area.

One strength which all children bring to school is their oral language. Linguists report that even the less able children have amazing mastery of their oral language by age six. One motivating method of applying this strength to reading instruction is the language experience approach. The approach can be used as a total reading program, as an introductory device, or as a supplement to another approach. Hall (1970) has explained concisely but thoroughly how to implement this approach in a classroom setting. As children recognize and read back their own language from an experience chart, their concepts of themselves as readers are greatly improved.

Once self-concept is improved, as indicated by the same types of diagnosis as discussed earlier, work can continue with needed skills. No dramatic shift from strong areas to weak areas

is necessary, however. The child can begin applying his strengths to unknown areas gradually, and instruction can shift slowly. The language experience approach, again, is a very useful tool in this transition since needed skills instruction can also be based on the language charts.

The question may arise, "What can I do with these children who may be almost nonreaders while I am giving reading instruction to the other children in my classroom?" The ideal answer is "activities that require little reading skill and yet build self-concept." The ideal may not always be available, but activities such as the following offer a starting point.

1. Prepare and assemble bulletin board displays. (The titles and labels encourage some reading but do not place impossible demands upon children.)
2. Develop and stage a puppet show. (No reading is required, but oral language ability can be developed and self-expression can be enhanced.)
3. Gather books, materials, and filmstrips for a project or some other specific purpose. (The only reading required is that of titles or indexes, but library exploration is made purposeful.)
4. Find articles dealing with a specific topic or articles of various types; construct a newspaper scrapbook or display. (Children need not read the articles; titles alone will supply most of the information needed to construct this project.)
5. Take an imaginary shopping trip through the ads in a newspaper; come as close as possible to spending a certain number of dollars; clip out the ads to show the accumulated spending. (The only reading required is the name of the item and the price; success at spending the "correct" amount of money is likely.)
6. Plan and give a room TV program. (No reading is required, but some is encouraged; the value of the project depends upon the type of program presented.)
7. Read a high interest, low vocabulary book that has not previously been read. (It is assumed that at least early first grade vocabulary can be read successfully.) A discussion of such materials appears later in this paper.

8. Use language experience charts for any of a host of follow-up activities including illustrating a group chart, constructing word banks, using words from charts for flash card games, rearranging words from charts into new sentences or stories, sharing individual language charts with others, finding words with common phonic elements, or classifying words. (Some reading is required, but children have an amazing ability to read their own language.)

These activities are designed to gradually move low self-concept children into reading instruction by concentrating on strengths and by guaranteeing success. It should be noted that most of the suggestions require a degree of freedom within the classroom. It would be difficult to develop appropriate activities in a classroom where children are always quiet and are always in their seats.

Using appropriate materials

After the low self-concept child has been gradually shifted into prescriptive instruction, success must continue. Skills must be introduced very slowly at first. The child must be helped to recognize how each small step of progress will contribute to his eventual reading success. Pupil-teacher conferences would again be useful for this purpose. In addition, the child should be allowed to succeed when he becomes involved with reading materials.

In recent years the publication of high interest, low vocabulary reading materials has opened the doors to this kind of success. Literally hundreds of such books and materials are available, and virtually every combination of interest and reading levels is included. A list of the publishers who produce these high interest, low vocabulary materials together with the titles of their series is included in the appendix. In addition to stories written about topics of interest to appropriate ages, these materials usually have the advantage of an equally appropriate format. High interest, low vocabulary materials are used for the comprehension portion of the reading program. Lessons can be developed in much the same manner as developmental reading activities are developed from basal reader stories except that less teacher guidance will be available from a teacher's manual.

If, for example, you want to appeal to third grade boys with low reading self-concepts and a love for adventure, you have a

number of choices. Suppose you select *The Sea Hunt* from Harr Wagner Publishers because it has an approximate first grade vocabulary level but an interest level appropriate for third grade. The first chapter (four and a half pages) deals with the beginning stages of a shark hunt and ends with a diver in trouble under water. The chapter could serve as the basis for one day's comprehension lesson. The lesson might consist of purpose setting, guided reading, comprehension follow-up, vocabulary development, and oral reading—much like a lesson from a basal. The difference would be the success resulting from appropriate vocabulary and interest levels.

Another alternative that allows the child to be successful with reading materials is the continuation of language experiences even after prescriptive skills teaching begins. In this type of program the teacher guides the class, group, or individual through an appealing activity. The activity is followed by oral language, i.e., by a discussion that is thorough enough to allow all interested individuals to contribute. Finally, a language experience chart is made using the child's or the children's exact language. Follow-up activities include rereading on several successive days, discussion of new ideas the second day, word analysis lessons built on words from the language charts, construction of word banks, and all of the independent activities listed earlier. For a much more detailed account of how language experiences can be implemented in the classroom, refer to the recent text by Hall (1970). Language experience charts can usually be read successfully because the child identifies with and recognizes his own language. Eventually, of course, the child must learn to read books, but the child who has learned a concept of himself as a reader will begin to read books on his own or with ease when guided to appealing stories.

Even basal readers or similar materials can sometimes be used to give the child success if they are handled with specific goals in mind. Instead of "covering the book," devote generous amounts of time to a few carefully selected stories which are interesting and are not overburdened with difficult concepts. Adequate time should go into the preparation for the stories so that the children can relate to them. One teacher, for example, spent a week preparing his inner city pupils for a space story. The children and teacher spent the week simulating pre-blastoff

activities and by transforming the classroom into a rocket. As they role-played, much of the vocabulary from the story was used. Then came the day of high excitement when they simulated the blastoff. Finally, the basal story about space travel was read. In spite of the somewhat difficult vocabulary load, the material was read successfully.

The main goal in any of these activities, once more, is child success. Even success, however, must be treated properly.

Making successes public

So many of the failures of the low self-concept child appear in public that, if the teacher is not alert, his few and relatively minor successes will remain quietly private. Since much of a child's self-concept is related to his view of how others see him, it is important that his peers become aware of his successes. In addition to the suggestions made in connection with creative writing and oral reading, methods for making successes public include calling on the child for answers which you are sure he knows and asking him to perform tasks in front of the class when you feel certain that he will complete the tasks correctly. Such tasks might include setting up science experiments, locating positions on a map, doing a chalkboard or chart-matching exercise, or performing any other activity that you know the child is able to do.

Putting failures in perspective

In spite of all your efforts, all children are bound to experience some failures from time to time. But children, especially when they are very young, sometimes overemphasize the importance of their failures. In particular, beginning readers who fail to learn a number of sight words or a phonic principle sometimes confuse these specific learning gaps with failure in learning to read. If ignored by the teacher, this conviction of failure can lead to a poor reading self-concept which will set off the self-concept/reading cycle discussed earlier.

A few preventive measures during these beginning stages could possibly allow a child to avoid a lifetime of reading inability. This, again, would be an excellent opportunity for a pupil-teacher conference. Sitting down with the child, who is confused about his specific failures, in order to discuss his situation may be all that is needed. When the child understands his situation, the specific problem may also be solved more easily, especially if

individual help is provided. Perhaps repeated conferences may be necessary to convince him that he is not failing.

Grading

A letter or numerical grade on a written task, after an oral presentation, or on a report card is an announcement of some degree of success or failure. If all grades were indications of success, they might become harmless; but they would also become meaningless. For the sake of self-concept, then, it would seem most advisable to discard grades and grading. You may not find this a very practical suggestion if your school policy requires grades. Even if you are obligated, however, to assign traditional grades on traditional report cards, you are probably the one who decides what to write on the papers your children submit. Little or no value is achieved by placing grades on the reading activities the children complete, especially for the child who desperately needs success. It may be argued that children have a right to know how well they perform on a task, but this practice does not dictate the announcement of grades or any negative descriptors. Neither feedback to the pupils nor evaluation should be confused with grading; however, if necessary, it is better that the child with a low self-concept be excluded from exacting feedback than that he receive a steady diet of failure. Perhaps such an approach will need to be explained to some parents; but once they understand the rationale, they can help extend the positive reinforcement into the home.

Encouraging a positive environment in the home

Obviously, most of your influence over the child's self-concept ends when he leaves the school building. But many parents are eager to help, and there are certain steps you can take to broaden the child's positive environment.

Research conducted by Brookover et al.(1955) illustrates that realistically enhancing the academic expectations and evaluations parents hold of their children's abilities improves self-concept and academic achievement. This gain can be as true in reading as it is in general achievement.

Group meetings with parents or school-home cooperative programs can be useful to explain the nature of self-concept and the value of using positive approaches at home. Typical child

development at the given age level, normal behavior deviations, and effective parent-child relationships can also be explained. These types of descriptions are also logical responses to parents who inquire about how to help at home. However, as indicated, the most successful results are achieved when the expectations and evaluations of parents toward their own child are realistically increased.

In order to increase parental expectations, then, you will need to meet with parents individually. If your school does not have scheduled parent-teacher conferences, it will be necessary to arrange for them, especially with the parents of children suffering from low self-concepts.

The content of these conferences must also be positive. Little value will ordinarily result from lecturing parents about the negative attitudes they may be displaying toward their child. Instead, parents must be shown the positive side of their child. If the parents' expectations are too low, which is commonly the case, attempt to convince them that their child has potential and real ability. If demanding parents have over-expectations for their child, show them the areas in which he is already putting forth effort and in which he is succeeding. Very often parent-teacher conferences concentrate on the problems of the child; suffice it to say that little positive self-concept is developed as a result of negative discussions.

Not all of the suggestions offered in this paper can be applied to every low self-concept child. However, you, the elementary teacher, can probably select a sufficient number to begin a thorough and concentrated program that will build the self-concept toward better reading.

CONCLUSION

How far can good self-concepts take you as you attempt to give every child the right to read? Can every child with a reading difficulty be helped by improving his self-concept? Should self-concept building become a standard part of the curriculum? These questions have not yet been answered. Sufficient evidence has been found, however, and enough support from authorities in education and psychology has been accumulated to suggest that many disabled readers can be helped by improving their self-concepts. The question is not *can* teachers improve reading and other abilities through self-concept building as much as it is *will* they. The importance of self-concept in learning to read must not only be recognized, it must be demonstrated in the classroom.

While a good self-concept appears to be vital for everyone, this paper has concentrated on the child with a poor self-concept and low reading ability. Four types of conditions have been suggested for improving self-concepts and thereby improving reading ability: establishing a positive atmosphere in the classroom, making the child feel accepted, providing him with success, and encouraging a positive environment at home. The success and acceptance built into these conditions are the best devices known for improving self-concepts. But it must be remembered, success and acceptance are not products of a set of materials or of a program or of a classroom organization; they are products of the most influential factor in all teaching—you, the teacher.

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Richardson, Sybil. "The Teacher's Influence Upon the Learner's Self Concept," *Claremont Reading Conference Yearbook,* 32 (n.m. 1968), 114-22.

Staines, J. W. "The Self-Picture as a Factor in the Classroom," *British Journal of Educational Psychology,* 28 (June 1958), 97-111.

APPENDIX

Self-concept measures and tests

Unpublished

How I See Myself. Ira J. Gordon, College of Education, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 33601

> Available in a 40-item elementary form; group administration is possible; each item consists of two diametric statements on a 5-point scale between which the student rates himself; indicates feeling of inadequacy and adequacy.

Personality Word List. Dr. Pratibha Deo, Department of Education, Punjab University, Sector 14, Chandigarh, India.

> Designed to measure self-concept and three aspects of self; normative data available; appropriate for any literate group; form in English.

Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. Ellen V. Piers and Dale B. Harris, Pennsylvania State University, 177 Borrowes Building, University Park, Pa. 16802.

> Eighty declarative statements to which subjects respond "yes" or "no"; six major dimensions; appropriate for students in third grade and above.

Self-Concept as a Learner (Elementary Scale). John K. Fisher, Department of Psychology, Edinboro State College, Edinboro, Pa. 16412.

> Assesses a person's views of himself as a class member, a task-oriented individual, a problem solver, and a motivated individual; appropriate for grades 3-6.

Self-Concept as a Learner. Gordon P. Liddle, West Education Annex, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20740.

> Measures self-images of children in grades 3-6; scale consists of 36 statements related to motivation, intellectual ability, task orientation, and class membership; students circle *yes* or *no*.

Self-Concept as a Learner Scale-SCAL. Walter B. Waetjen, Vice-president, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20740.

> Four components which constitute certain dimensions of one's self-concept as a learner; 50 statements.

Specific and Global Self-Concept. Lois Stillwell, 3921 Woodthrust Road, Akron, Ohio 44314.

> Measures specific (reading) as well as global self-concept; appropriate for fourth graders and above.

Published

California Test of Personality. Subtest: "Sense of Personal Worth" (1939, 1953), California Test Bureau, Del Monte Research Park, Monterey, California 93940. k-3, 4-8, 7-10, 9-16, adult.

Mental Health Analysis. Subtest: "Feelings of Inadequacy" (1946, 1959), California Test Bureau, Del Monte Research Park, Monterey, California 93940. 4-8, 7-9, 9-16, adult.

Personal Adjustment Inventory. Subtest: "Personal Inferiority" (1931, 1961), Association Press, 291 Broadway, New York, N. Y. 10007. 9-13.

High interest, low vocabulary materials: publishers and series titles

Benefic Press

Animal Adventure Series
Butternut Bill Series
Button Family Adventures Series
Cowboy Sam Series
Dan Frontier Series
Easy-To-Read Books
Moonbeam Series
Outdoor Adventure Series
Sailor Jack Series
Space-Age Books
Tommy O'Toole Books
World of Adventure Series

Bobbs-Merrill

Childhood of Famous Americans Series

Children's Press

Frontiers of America Books
I Want To Be Books
True Books

Doubleday

Signal Books

Garrard

Books by Tony Palazzo
Discovery Books
Dolch Books
Holiday Books
Indian Series
Junior Science Books
Rivers of the World Books

Sports Series
World Explorer Books

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
Companion Series

Harper and Row
The American Adventure Series

Harr Wagner Publishing Company (Field Publications)
The Checkered Flag Series
Cornerstone Readers
The Deep-Sea Adventure Series
The Jim Forest Readers
The Morgan Bay Mystery Series
The Reading-Motivated Series
The Time Machine Series
The Wildlife Adventure Series

Little, Brown
Young Sports Stories

Lyons and Carnahan
Classmate Editions
Curriculum Motivation Series

Reader's Digest Services
Advanced Reading Skill Builders
Help Yourself to Improve Your Reading
Reading Skill Builders

Scott, Foresman
Open Highways Books

Webster Division, McGraw-Hill
The Everyreader Series

Appendix

ERIC/CRIER + IRA PUBLICATIONS

The following publications are the cooperative products of ERIC/CRIER and IRA and are available from the International Reading Association, Six Tyre Avenue, Newark, Delaware 19711 at the prices indicated. Publications listing an EDRS number are also available in microfiche at 65¢ each. See page 39 for ordering microfiche.

Reading Research Profiles Bibliography Series

Price per copy: IRA Members $1.00, Nonmembers $1.50

Leo Fay. *Organization and Administration of School Reading Programs*, 1971, 64 pp. (ED 046 677)

James L. Laffey. *Methods of Reading Instruction*, 1971, 87 pp. (ED 047 930)

Roger Farr. *Measurement of Reading Achievement*, 1971, 96 pp. (ED 049 906)

Leo Fay. *Reading Research: Methodology, Summaries, and Application*, 1971, 75 pp. (ED 049 023)

Samuel Weintraub. *Auditory Perception and Deafness*, 1972, 51 pp.

Samuel Weintraub. *Vision-Visual Discrimination*. In press.

Index

20 Year Annotated Index to The Reading Teacher
IRA Members $3.00, Nonmembers $3.50 (ED 031 608)

Monographs

A. Sterl Artley. *Trends and Practices in Secondary School Reading, 1968, 131 pp. IRA Members $3.00, Nonmembers $3.50. (ED 024 560)*

Ruth Strang. *Reading Diagnosis and Remediation*, 1968, 190 pp. IRA Members $3.00, Nonmembers $3.50. (ED 025 402)

Roger Farr. *Reading: What Can Be Measured?* 1970, 299 pp. IRA Members $3.25, Nonmembers $4.95. (ED 032 258)

James L. Laffey. *Reading in the Content Areas*, 1972, 236 pp. IRA Members $3.00, Nonmembers $4.50.

Other Interpretive Papers
Price per copy: IRA Members $1.00, Nonmembers $1.50

Nicholas Anastasiow. *Oral Language: Expression of Thought*, 1971, 51 pp.

Ivan Quandt. *Self-Concept and Reading*, 1972, 40 pp.

Reading Information Series: WHERE DO WE GO?
Price per copy: IRA Members $1.00, Nonmembers $1.50

Eugene Jongsma. *The Cloze Procedure as a Teaching Technique*, 1971, 42 pp.

MaryAnne Hall. *The Language Experience Approach for the Culturally Disadvantaged*, 1972, 42 pp.

Diane Lapp. *The Use of Behavioral Objectives in Education*, 1972, 56 pp.

Lawrence G. Moburg. *Inservice Teacher Training in Reading*, 1972, 42 pp.

John Paul Jones. *Intersensory Transfer, Perceptual Shifting, Modal Preference, and Reading*, 1972, 48 pp.

Charles R. Cooper. *Measuring Growth in Appreciation of Literature*, 1972, 32 pp.

Micromonographs: A Series for Parents
Price per copy: IRA Members 35¢, Nonmembers 50¢
Bulk order price: 20¢ each on orders of 100 or more copies

Rosemary Winebrenner. *How can I get my teenager to read?* 12 pp.

Norma Rogers. *What is reading readiness?* 16 pp.

Norma Rogers. *How can I help my child get ready to read?* 24 pp.

Norma Rogers. *What books and records should I get for my preschooler?* 20 pp.

Molly Ransbury. *How can I encourage my primary grade child to read?* 12 pp.

Marcia Baghban. *How can I help my child learn to read English as a second language?* 16 pp.

Don Elberly. *How does my child's vision affect his reading?* 12 pp.

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